



ACADEMY *of* IDEAS

FREE MINDS FOR A FREE SOCIETY



“I must be myself, I cannot break myself any longer for you. . .If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

The great 19th century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that to flourish we must be a non-conformist. If we just think as others think and do as others do, we limit our potential and place our health or sickness at the mercy of social forces beyond our control. In this video we are going to explore the dangers of conformity, what non-conformity meant for Emerson, and how the non-conformist acts as a force of good in a society gone mad.

“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

To be a conformist is to orient our life around the dominant norms, values, and ideals of our society. It is to allow the boundaries and templates of our culture to shape our sense of self. Most of us become conformists without reflecting on what we are doing – we see everyone around us conforming and so it feels natural to do the same. But conformity comes at a price, or as Emerson stated in a lecture given in 1844:

“I pay a destructive tax in my conformity.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lecture Read Before the Society in Amory Hall, March 1844

In any society only certain character traits are favoured by the trends of conformity, while many others – which may be healthy in their own right – are looked upon with indifference or disdain. In our day, for example, extroversion is favoured over introversion, obedience over disobedience, and risk-aversion over risk-taking. Some people may find their inner nature fits the mold of conformity,

but many will find the opposite. For those of us in the latter group, conformity is akin to wearing a mask made to fit the mold of another's face. The mask of conformity never feels comfortable and at times it may cause us to feel like a fraud or imposter.

Conformity also leads to waste – wasted time, wasted opportunities, and wasted resources. In the need to satisfy others and maintain appearances, we do things we do not value, say things we do not believe, and obtain things we do not need, or as Emerson writes:

“Custom . . . gives me no power therefrom, and runs me in debt to boot. We spend our incomes . . . for a hundred trifles, I know not what, and not for the things of a man. Our expense is almost all for conformity.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Man the Reformer

But the dangers of conformity reach pathological levels when, as in our day, a society becomes infected with lies. Politicians lie almost as frequently as they open their mouths. A degenerate education system teaches lies on topics ranging from science, to history, ethics, economics, and politics. The media lies about world events. While corporations lie to us about the value, or safety, of their products. With no shortage of lies percolating throughout society, the modern path of conformity leads in errant ways. It encourages us to go into debt to buy things we don't need, to consume unhealthy foods, to be obedient to those in power, to take pharmaceutical drugs that do more harm than good, to eschew our passion in favour of money or social status, and if we ever feel anxious or depressed, the conformist way is to distract ourselves with screens, or to numb ourselves with psychotropic drugs.

“All goes well as long as you run with conformists. But you, who are an honest man in other particulars, know that there is alive somewhere a man whose honesty reaches to this point also, that he shall not kneel to false gods, and, on the day when you meet him, you sink into the class of counterfeits. . . If you take in a lie, you must take in all that belongs to it.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Religion

To be a non-conformist, in the modern world, is to renounce the lies that shape our society and to renounce the self that has been shaped by these lies. This act of renunciation paves the way for self-transformation, or as Emerson writes: “*The man who renounces himself, comes to himself.*” (*Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lecture to Divinity Students*). When we abandon the habits of conformity and stop pursuing its ideals, we clear the way for the emergence of a more authentic state of being. We take off the false mask of conformity and permit our individual personality to shine through. But our renunciation should not be limited to self-renunciation, we should also renounce affiliation with organizations and institutions that are infiltrated by the lies of our society. For a non-conformist, according to Emerson, must stand under his or her own banner, not the banner of another:

“It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

Along with the act of renunciation, the non-conformist must establish a new direction in life as merely rejecting conformist ways, without replacing them with something new, will leave us in a pit of aimless and meaningless despair. We need new pursuits to keep us occupied, new habits to keep our life structured, and new goals to give us direction. In the process of re-orienting our life, we should work with what nature has granted us, as it is by cultivating our strengths and talents and aligning our life around pursuits we enjoy, that we unleash our power and pave the way for a great life, or as Emerson writes:

“There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction . . . that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

If conformity has led us astray and we don’t know where truth lies or what the plot of ground we are meant to till consists of, spending time in solitude can help correct for this confusion. Away from the chatter and distraction of other minds, solitude can help us understand who we are and what we want from life. There are voices, wrote Emerson “*which we hear in solitude, [that] grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world.*” (*Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance*). Emerson, however, while valuing solitude, did not believe the non-conformist should be a recluse. To flourish as a non-conformist is to strike the optimal balance between solitude and society. We must learn to live in harmony with others without an excessive need to gain their approval or to mimic their errant ways. Or as Emerson put it:

“Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Society and Solitude

Many people recognize the sickness of modern society, but few choose a path of non-conformity as the means of escape. One reason for this is fear, and specifically a fear of ridicule and rejection. The non-conformist must overcome this fear, or at least learn that constructive, non-conformist action can be taken even when consumed by fear:

“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule. . . may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. . . It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

In learning to deal with ridicule and rejection it can be helpful to recognize a constructive value to this experience. Not only does it provide us with an opportunity to cultivate the courage of acting in the face of our fears, but furthermore, those who treat us with contempt sometimes reveal truths of our character that those who care for us are too timid to point out. But even if the ridicule is not

constructive, even if it is based on envy or lies, we can use the disapproval of others as motivating fuel that impels us to greater heights, and as Emerson writes:

“Dear to us are those who love us; the swift moments we spend with them are a compensation for a great deal of misery; they enlarge our life; but dearer are those who reject us as unworthy, for they add another life: they build a heaven before us whereof we had not dreamed, and thereby supply to us new powers out of the recesses of the spirit, and urge us to new and unattempted performances.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, New England Reformers

If we learn to conquer the fear of ridicule and rejection, we will possess a crucial skill in the art of non-conformity. But there is another barrier that prevents many from going the way of a non-conformist and this is laziness. To cultivate our own path through life requires hard work, discipline, and a ruthless persistence of action. For Emerson's non-conformist is not passive, he is an active agent striving to change the world. Once the non-conformist selects a valuable goal, he sticks to it and is not driven off course merely because a bunch conformists disapprove of his ways, or as Emerson writes:

“All men have wandering impulses, fits and starts of generosity. But when you have chosen your part, abide by it, and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Heroism

Or as he writes elsewhere:

“If you would serve your brother, because it is fit for you to serve him, do not take back your words when you find that prudent people do not commend you. Adhere to your own act, and congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant and broken the monotony of a decorous age. It was a high counsel that I once heard given to a young person – “Always do what you are afraid to do.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Heroism

Following a non-conformist path will make us healthier, happier, and more powerful, but it will also turn us into a force of good in the world. For the inner state of our being manifests the events of the outer world, or as Emerson put it: “*A man will see his character emitted in the events that seem to meet [him], but which exude from and accompany him.*” (*Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Conduct of Life*) Conformists, in living by lies, are manifesting a sick society. The non-conformist, in aligning himself with the truth of his inner nature and the truth of the world, will manifest events that act as the antidote to a world gone mad.

“In the thought of tomorrow there is a power to upheave . . . all the creeds. . . of the nations, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted. Every man is not so much a workman in the world, as he is a suggestion of that he should be. Men walk as prophecies of the next age.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Circles